The GIRL and the BILL

"What Happened Then?" Inquired the Minister.

By BANNISTER MERWIN
Illustrations by RAY WALTER

SYNOPSIS.

At the expense of a soiled hat Robert Orme saves from arrest a girl in a black touring car who has caused a traffic jam on State street. He buys a new hat and is given in change a five dollar bill with: "Remember the person you pay this to," written on it. A second time he helps the lady in the black car, and learns that in Tom and Bessie Wallingham they have mutual friends, but gains no further hint of her identity.

Senor Poritol of South America and Senor Alcatrante, minister from the same country, and some Japs try to get possession of the bill. Two of the latter overpower Orme and effect a forcible exchange of the marked bill for another.

Orme finds the girl of the black car waiting for him. She also wants the bill. Orme tells his story. She recognizes one of the Japs as her father's butler, Maku. A second inscription on the bill is the key to the hiding place of important papers stolen from her father. Orme and the "Girl" start out in the black car in quest of the papers. In the university grounds in Evanston the hiding place is located. Maku and another Jap are there. Orme fells Maku and the other Jap escapes. Orme finds in Maku's pocket a folded slip of paper. He takes the girl, whose name is still unknown to him, to the home of a friend in Evanston. Returning to the university grounds Orme gets in conversation with a guard at the life-saving station. They hear a motor boat in trouble in the darkness on the lake. They find the crippled boat. In it are the Jap with the papers and "Girl." She jumps into Orme's boat, but the Jap eludes pursuit. Orme finds on the paper he took from Maku the address, "241 N. Parker street." He goes there and finds Arima, teacher of jiu-jitsu, is on the third floor. He calls on Alla, clairvoyant, on the fourth floor, descends by the fire-escape and conceals himself under a table in Arima's room. Alcatrante, Poritol and the Jap minister enter. Orme finds the papers in a drawer, under the table and substitutes mining prospectuses for them. He learns that the papers are of international importance with a time limit for signatures of that night midnight. The substitution is discovered. The girl appears and leaves again after being told that the American has the papers. Orme attempts to get away, is discovered and set upon by Arima and Maku. He eludes them and is hidden in a closet by the clairvoyant. Orme escapes during a seance given by Alla. On the sidewalk he encounters Alcatrante. Orme goes to find Tom Wallingham. Alcatrante hangs on and tries to get the papers. During the excitement caused by one of Alcatrante's tricks to delay Orme, the latter sees the girl and follows her back to Wallingham's office. He and the girl are locked in a giant specimen refrigerator by Alcatrante.

They confess their love and when they had almost abandoned hope of escape Orme breaks the thermometer coils and attracts the attention of a late-going clerk. They are liberated.

Alcatrante is on watch. They get away in a hired motor car to Evanston. The chauffeur turns out to be Maku. He runs them to a quiet spot where they meet another motor. Orme pretends to conceal the papers under the seat, but drops them in the road. Orme fights Arima, Maku and two other Japs.

A policeman intervenes. The girl drives away in one car with what Orme deceives her into thinking are the real papers. Arima finds the real papers, eludes the policeman and drives away in another car. Orme, unnoticed, climbs in behind, throttles the Jap, recovers the stolen papers and goes to Arradale. Bessie Wallingham introduces him to the club members and the Japanese minister.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"He thought himself safe," continued Orme, "but my friend had caught the back of the motor car just as it started. He climbed silently into the tonneau, and throwing his arm around the neck of the thief, pulled him backward from his seat.

"The car was ditched, and my friend and the thief were both thrown out. My friend was not hurt. The thief, however, had his leg broken."

"What happened then?" inquired the minister; for Orme had paused.

"Oh, my friend took the proxies from the thief's pocket and walked away. He stopped at the nearest farmhouse and sent help back."

"Even in America," commented the minister, "the frien's of the injured man might see that his hurt was avenge. The man who caused the accident should be made to suffer."

"Oh, no," said Orme. "If the matter were pressed at all, the correct thing to do would be to arrest the man with the broken leg. He had stolen the papers in the first place. Harm came to him, when he tried to escape with the papers after stealing them. But as a matter of fact, the average American would consider the affair at an end."

"Your story and mine are dissimilar," remarked the minister.

"Perhaps. But they involve a similar question: Whether a man should yield passively to a power that appears to be stronger than his own. In America we do not yield passively unless we understand all the bearings of the case, and see that it is right to yield."

At this moment a motor car came up the drive. "There's our car, Bob," said Bessie. "Wait a moment, while I get my wraps. I know that you are impatient to go."

"I know that you are a good friend," he whispered, as she arose.

He did not care to remain with the group in Bessie's absence. With a bow, he turned to stroll by himself down the veranda. But the minister jumped to his feet and called:

"Mr. Orme!"

Orme looked back. "Please be so good as to return," continued the minister.

With mere politeness, Orme halted, and took a step back toward his chair.

An air of startled expectancy was manifest in the position taken by the different members of the group. The minister's voice had sounded sharp and authoritative, and he now stepped forward a pace or two, stopping at a point where the light from one of the clubhouse windows fell full on his face. Clearly he was laboring under great excitement.

"You have something to say to me?" quired Orme. He foresaw an effort detain him

"I am compelled to ask the ladies to leave us for a few minutes," said the minister, seriously. "There is a matter of utmos' importance."

He bowed. The women, hesitating in their embarrassment, rose and walked away, leaving the half-dozen men standing in a circle.

"I find myself in an awkward position," began the minister, slowly. "I am a guest of your club, and I should never dream of saying what I mus' say, were my own personal affairs alone involved. Let me urge that no one leave until I have done."

For a tense moment he was silent. Then he went on:

"Gentlemen, while we were talking together here, I had in my pocket certain papers of great importance to my country. In the last few minutes they have disappeared. I regret to say it—but, gentlemen, some one has taken them."

There was a gasp of astonishment.

"I mus' even open myself to the charge of abusing your hospitality rather than let the matter pass. If I could only make you understand how grave it is"—he was brilliantly impressive. Just the right shade of reluctance colored his earnestness.

"I have every reason to think," he continued, "that the possession of those papers would be of immense personal advantage to the man who has been sitting at my right—Mr. Orme."

"This is a serious charge, excellency," exclaimed one of the men.

"I am aware of that. But I am obliged to ask you not to dismiss it hastily. My position and standing are known to you. When I tell you that these papers are of importance to my country, you can only in part realize how great that importance it. Gentlemen, I mus' ask Mr. Orme whether he has the papers."

Orme saw that the minister's bold stroke was having its effect. He decided quickly to meet it with frankness. "The papers to which his excellency refers," he said quietly, "are in my pocket."

Several of the men exclaimed.

"But," Orme went on, "I did not take them from his excellency. On the contrary, his agents have for some time been using every device to steal them from me. They have failed, and now he is making a last attempt by trying to persuade you that they belong to him."

"I submit that this smart answer does not satisfy my charge," cried the minister.

"Do you really wish to go further?" demanded Orme. "Would you like me to explain to these men what those papers really mean?"

"If you do that, you betray my country's secrets."

Orme turned to the others. "His excellency and I are both guests here," he said. "Leaving his official position out of the question, my word must go as far as his. I assure you that he has no claim at all upon the papers in my pocket."

"That is not true!"

The minister's words exploded in a sharp staccato.

"In this country," said Orme calmly, "we knock men down for words like that. In Japan, perhaps, the lie can be passed with impunity."

"Gentlemen, I ask that Mr. Orme be detained," exclaimed the minister furiously.

"I will not be detained," said Orme.

The other men were whispering among themselves, and at last one of them stepped forward as spokesman. "This is a serious matter for the club," he said. "I suggest, Mr. Orme, that we go to the library"—he glanced significantly at the other groups on the veranda—"where no one can overhear us, and talk the matter over quietly."

"But that will exactly fit in with his scheme," exclaimed Orme, heatedly. "He knows that, in the interests of our own country"—he hazarded this—"I must be at a certain place before midnight. He will use every means to delay me—even to charging me with theft."

"What is that?" Bessie Wallingham's voice broke in upon them. "Is any one daring to accuse Bob Orme?"

In her long, gray silk motor cloak, with the filmy chiffon veil bound about her hat, she startled them, like an apparition.

The spokesman explained. "His excellency says that Mr. Orme has stolen some papers from him."

"Then his excellency is at fault," said Bessie, promptly. "I vouch for Mr. Orme. He is Tom's best friend, and Tom is one of the governors of the club. Come, Bob."

She turned away decisively, and Orme recognized the advantage she had given him, and strode after her. From noises behind him he gathered that the men were holding the minister back by main force.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Goal.

The chauffeur was opening the door of the waiting car. It was a black car—a car with strangely familiar lines. Orme started. "Where did that come from?" he demanded.

Bessie smiled at him. "That is my surprise for you. My very dear friend, whom you so much desire to see, telephoned me here this evening and asked me to spend the night with her instead of returning to Chicago. She promised to send her car for me. It was long enough coming, goodness knows, but if it had appeared sooner, I should have gone before you arrived."

Orme understood. The girl had telephoned to Bessie while he waited there on La Salle street. She had planned a meeting that would satisfy him with full knowledge of her name and place. And the lateness of the car in reaching Arradale was unquestionably owing to the fact that it had not set out on its errand until after the girl reached home and gave her chauffeur the order. Orme welcomed this evidence that she had got home safely.

Bessie jumped lightly into the tonneau, and Orme followed. The car glided from the grounds. Eastward it went, through the pleasant, rolling farming country, that was wrapped in the beauty of the starry night. They crossed a bridge over a narrow creek.

"You would hardly think," said Bessie, "that this is so-called north branch of the Chicago river."

"I would believe anything about that river," he replied.

She laughed nervously. He knew that she was suppressing her natural interest in the scene she had witnessed on the veranda; yet, of course, she was expecting some explanation.

"Bessie," he said, "I am sorry to have got into such a muss there at the club. The Japanese minister was the last man I wanted to see."

She did not answer.

"Perhaps your friend—whom we are now going to visit—will explain things a little," he went on. "I can tell you only that I had in my pocket certain papers which the Jap would have given much to get hold of. He tried it by accusing me of stealing them from him. It was very awkward."

"I understand better than you think," she said, suddenly. "Don't you see, you big stupid, that I know where we are going? That tells me something. I can put two and two together."

"Then I needn't try to do any more explaining of things I can't explain."

"Of course not. You are forgiven all. Just think, Bob, it's nearly a year since you stood up with Tom and me."

"That's so!"

"How time does go! See"—as the car turned at a crossing—"we are going northward. We are bound for the village of Winnetka. Does that tell you anything?"

"Nothing at all," said Orme, striving vainly to give the Indian name a place in his mind.

On they sped. Orme looked at his watch. It was half-past ten.

"We must be nearly there," he said.

"Yes, it's only a little way, now."

They were going eastward again, following a narrow dirt road. Suddenly the chauffeur threw the brakes on hard. Orme and Bessie, thrown forward by the sudden stopping, clutched the sides of the car. There was a crash, and they found themselves in the bottom of the tonneau.

Orme was unharmed. "Are you all right, Bessie?" he asked.

"All right." Her voice was cheery.

He leaped to the road. The chauffeur had descended and was hurrying to the front of the car.

"What was it?" asked Orme.

"Some one pushed a wheelbarrow into the road just as we were coming."

"A wheelbarrow!"

"Yes, sir. There it is."

Orme looked at the wheelbarrow. It was wedged under the front of the car. He peered off into the field at the left. Dimly he could see a running figure, and he hastily climbed the rail fence and started in pursuit.

It was a hard sprint. The running man was fast on his feet, but his speed did not long serve him, for he stumbled and fell. He did not rise, and Orme, coming up, for the moment supposed him to be stunned.

Bending over, he discovered that the prostrate man was panting hard, and digging his hands into the turf.

"Get up," commanded Orme.

The man got to his knees and, turning, raised supplicating hands.

"Poritol!" exclaimed Orme.

"Oh, Mr. Orme, spare me. It was an accident." His face worked convulsively. "I—I—" Something like a sob escaped him, and Orme again found himself divided between contempt and pity.

"What were you doing with that wheelbarrow?"

Poritol kept his frightened eyes on Orme's face, but he said nothing.

"Well, I will explain it. You followed the car when it started for Arradale. You waited here, found a wheelbarrow, and tried to wreck us. It is further evidence of your comic equipment that you should use a wheelbarrow."

Poritol got to his feet. "You are mistaken, dear Mr. Orme. I—I—"

Orme smiled grimly. "Stop," he said. "Don't explain. Now I want you to stay right here in this field for a half hour. Don't budge. If I catch you outside, I'll take you to the nearest jail."

Poritol drew himself up. "As an attache I am exempt," he said, with a pitiful attempt at dignity.

"You are not exempt from the consequences of a crime like this. Now, get on your knees."

Whimpering, Poritol kneeled.

"Stay in that position."

"Oh, sir—oh, my very dear sir. I—"

"Stay there!" thundered Orme.

Poritol was still, but his lips moved, and his interlaced fingers worked convulsively.

As Orme walked away, he stopped now and then to look back. Poritol did not move, and Orme long carried the picture of that kneeling figure.

"Who was it?" asked Bessie Wallingham, as he climbed back over the fence.

"A puppy with sharp teeth," he replied, thinking of what the girl had said. "We might as well forget him."

She studied him in silence, then pointed to the chauffeur, who was down at the side of the car.

"Anything damaged?" Orme queried.

"Yes, sir."

"Much?"

"Two hours' work, sir."

"Pshaw!" Orme shut his teeth down hard; Poritol had he known it, might have felt thankful that he was not near at hand. He turned to Bessie. "How much farther is it?"

The chauffeur answered. "About three miles, sir."

Three miles over dark country roads—and it was nearly 11 o'clock. He glanced ahead. In the distance a light twinkled.

"Bessie," he said, "come with me to that farmhouse. We must go on. Or, if you prefer to wait here—"

"I'll go with you, of course."

They walked along the road to the farm gate. A cur yelped at their feet as they approached the house, and an old man, coatless and slippered, opened the door, holding an oil lamp high above his head. "Down, Rover! What do you want?" he shouted.

"We've got to have a rig to take us to Winnetka," said Orme. "Our car broke down."

The old man reflected. "Can't do it," he said, at last. "All shet up fer the night. Can't leave the missus alone."

A head protruded from a dark upper window. "Yes, you can, Simeon," growled a woman's guttural voice.

"Wall—I don't know—"

"Yes, you can." She turned to Orme. "He'll take ye fer five dollars cash. Ye can pay me."

Orme turned to Bessie. "Have you any money?" he whispered.

"Heavens! I left my hand bag in my locker at the clubhouse. How stupid!"

"Never mind." Orme saw that he must lose the marked bill after all. Regretfully he took it from his pocket. The woman had disappeared from the window, and now she came to the door and stood behind her husband. Wrapped in an old blanket, she made a gaunt figure, not unlike a squaw. As Orme walked up the two or three steps, she stretched her hand over her husband's shoulder and snatched the bill, examining it closely by the lamplight.

"What's this writin' on it?" she demanded, fiercely.

"Oh, that's just somebody's joke. It doesn't hurt anything."

"Well, I don't know." She looked at it doubtfully, then crumpled it tight in her fist. "I guess it'll pass. Git a move on you, Simeon."

The old man departed, grumbling, to the barn, and the woman drew back into the house, shutting the door carefully. Orme and Bessie heard the bolts click as she shot them home.

"Hospitable!" exclaimed Bessie, seating herself on the doorstep.

After a wait that seemed interminable, the old man came driving around the house. To a ramshackle buggy he had hitched a decrepit horse. They wedged in as best they could, the old man between them, and at a shuffling amble the nag proceeded through the gate and turned eastward.

In the course of 20 minutes they crossed railroad tracks and entered the shady streets of the village, Bessie directing the old man where to drive. Presently they came to the entrance of what appeared to be an extensive estate. Back among the trees glimmered the lights of a house. "Turn in," said Bessie.

A thought struck Orme. If Poritol, why not the Japanese? Maku and his friends might easily have got back to this place. And if the minister had been able to telephone to his allies from Arradale, they would be expecting him.

"Stop!" he whispered. "Let me out. You drive on to the door and wait there for me."

Bessie nodded. She did not comprehend, but she accepted the situation unhesitatingly.

Orme noted, by the light of the lamp at the gate, the shimmer of the veil that was wound around her hat.

"Give me your veil," he said.

She withdrew the pins and unwound the piece of gossamer. He took it and stepped to the ground, concealing himself among the trees that lined the drive.

The buggy proceeded slowly. Orme followed afoot, on a parallel course, keeping well back among the trees. At a certain point, after the buggy passed, a figure stepped out into the drive, and stood looking after it. From his build and the peculiar agility of his motions, he was recognized as Maku. Orme hunted about till he found a bush from which he could quietly break a wand about six feet long. Stripping it of leaves, he fastened the veil to one end of it and tiptoed toward the drive.

The Japanese was still looking after the buggy, which had drawn up before the house.

Suddenly, out of the darkness a sinuous gray form came floating toward him. It wavered, advanced, halted, then seemed to rush. The seance of the afternoon was fresh in the mind of the Japanese. With screams of terror, he turned and fled down the drive, while Orme, removing the veil from the stick, moved on toward the house. Madam Alla's game certainly was effective in dealing with Orientals.

A moment later Orme and Bessie had crossed the roomy veranda and were at the door, while the old man, still grumbling, swung around the circle of the drive and rattled away. Orme's heart was pounding. When the servant answered the bell, he drew back and he did not hear the words which Bessie spoke in a low voice. They were ushered into a wide reception hall, and the servant went to announce them.

"You wish to see her alone," said Bessie. "Go in there and I will arrange it."

He went as she directed, into a little reception room, and there he waited while subdued feminine greetings were exchanged in the hall without. Then, at last, through the doorway came the gracious, lovely figure of the girl.

"Oh," she whispered, "I knew you would come, dear—I knew."

He took her hands and drew her to him. But with a glance at the doorway she held herself away from him.

In his delight at seeing her he had almost forgotten his mission. But now he remembered.

"I have the papers," he said, taking them from his pocket.

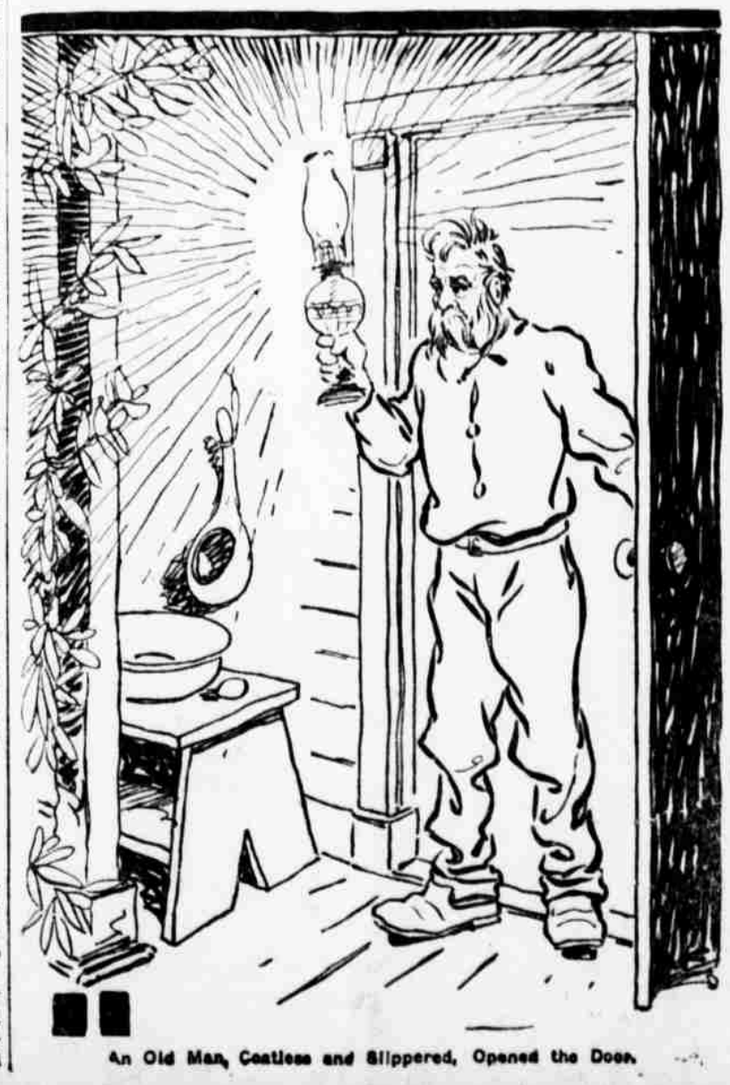
"I was sure you had them. I was sure that you would come."

He laid them in her hands. "Forgive me, Girl, for fooling you with that blank contract."

She laughed happily. "I didn't look at it until I got home. Then I was so disappointed that I almost cried. But when I thought it over, I understood. Oh, my dear, I believed in you so strongly that even then I went to my father and told him that the papers were on the way—that they would be here in time. I just simply knew you would come."

Regardless of the open doorway he clasped her closely, and she buried her face in his coat with a little laugh that was almost a sob. Then, suddenly, she left him standing there and, holding the papers tight, went from the room.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



An Old Man, Coatless and Slippered, Opened the Door.

Up In the Air.

Glenn H. Curtiss was describing in New York his flight down the Hudson.

"The intelligent interest of the public in my aeroplane and its operation," he said, "shows very plainly that people nowadays have a good general knowledge of aeronautics. It wasn't always so. When I think of the stupid and useless questions about my machine that used to exasperate me to the point of rudeness, I am reminded of Smith.

"Smith, meeting Jones one day, exclaimed:

"'Hallo, Jones! You wearing glasses? What's that for?'

"Jones, annoyed at the foolishness of the question, answered irritably: 'Corns!'"

An Exploded Theory.

"Children," said the Sunday school teacher, "there is one thing that I wish to especially impress upon your minds. Always be kind to your parents. Make it as pleasant for them as you can. Remember that none of you can ever have another mother after the one you posses is gone. You can never—"

"Oh, yes, we can," interrupted a little boy who had lost most of his buttons. "I lost mine last week and pa brought me a new one home the same day he got back from the courthouse."